

Myths and Ecological Concerns: An Understanding of Aboriginal Wisdom through the Myths of Northwest Canada and Northeast India

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An Abstract

Ecological and environmental concerns have become the focus of all developmental discourses of the present with the realisation of destructive and disharmonious way of life adopted by the materialistic human population. Many genuine attempts have been made to adopt simple and harmonious ways of life that result in an exploration of the self and a fine sense of understanding of the importance of every part of our surroundings and respect for every creation, part of this universe. The proposed paper wants to highlight the fact that our ancestors led a harmonious life that valued everything surrounding it. Our ancestral wisdom can be realised through myths, legends and folktales handed over to us over generations. Since the beginning of human history, people have lived in close contacts with the surroundings respecting the flora and the fauna and the elements of water, earth and sky. Innumerable set of beliefs and stories are part of all human societies scattered on the different parts of the globe. Most of the oral societies developed their own myths and legends which appear to be simple animal stories and sometimes superstitious beliefs. Water, animals and plants are the predominant features of these stories and beliefs. This paper explores various myths from Canada and the Northeast India, prevalent among the tribal societies. These myths reveal the patterns of life and thought and the spiritual pursuits of the first nation societies from the Northwest coast of Canada and the mysterious north eastern parts of India. The multi layered meaning of Native symbolism captured in Nancy Ruddel's book on Canadian Museum of Civilization, throwing light on the significance of totem poles, canoes and animal myths, has significantly contributed to the understanding of the Canadian native wisdom. Apart from the cultural beliefs of

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native societies like the Coast Salish, Nuu-Chah-Nulth, Central Coast, Nuxalk and Tsimshian, the paper attempts at capturing the aura of beliefs surrounding the Khasis, the Nagas, the Bodos and the Assamese of the Northeast India. By deciphering these myths, we can realise the wisdom of the societies that we call primitive. These myths and legends provide us with an understanding of nature around us and the significance of every minute part in it. It also generates a sense of wonder and an attitude of respect towards parts of creation.

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The myths are told on a variety of occasions: some are chanted during the dance...some are repeated at ceremonies, at a funeral or harvest thanksgiving or to save the life of a child; others are told round the fire in the Naga morung or Adimoshup; yet others are perhaps not told publicly at all, but are passed down from shaman to shaman as a kind of traditional wisdom or history (Elwin xx).

Myths have meanings because they represent archetypes, patterns of life and thought that are universally valid. The terms and settings of ancient myths may seem strange but, by learning to think myth logically, we can unlock their secrets and see how they relate to the contemporary world (Ruddel 1)

Myths are generally considered as widely held beliefs or ideas with no scientific base or rational explanation. Generally, they are associated with the early histories of people reflecting the traditions, cultural and social situations in a symbolic way involving supernatural elements and natural elements surrounding the society. They can be in the form of folktales, fables, parables and legends. Myths, many times, are strongly associated with religion and are capable of producing unquestionable faith bordering on superstitious notions and violent manifestations of crude irrational behavioral patterns. Myths are also defined as psychological and spiritual processes at work in the human psyche (Ruddel 2). Myths have universal themes but they mostly reflect specific societies giving expression to the fears, knowledge and sense of wonder experienced while exploring the cosmic layers. They have great influence on human attitudes and behaviour. At the same time, many of the aboriginal myths appear to be strange, fascinating stories on animals and supernatural elements mirroring the initial understanding of nature by man and his sense of wonder towards cosmic patterns surrounding him, for which he had no scientific explanation. All cultures have developed their own myths and these stories have great symbolic power. India is a country of myths and as Raja Rao rightly points out every village of India has a myth and there is no place that has not a myth of its own (Raja Rao "Introduction"). The tribal or the aboriginal myths of India are more rooted in nature than religion and reflect natural wisdom, concern for environment and ecology and a sense of harmony. These myths symbolically represent the cycles of life and inter-dependence of man and animals and their unique roles in the continuation of life.

The present paper focuses particularly on myths of Northeastern India and Northwestern coast of Canada. Natural elements like water, sky, animals, flora and fauna are the vital ingredients of these myths and man's superiority over other creations of nature is rarely emphasized. Instead, all beings are considered as the essential parts of existence and many myths have instances of transformation from animal forms into human forms. The uniqueness of man is completely denied by the tribal myths. These myths state that the primordial knowledge came to the possession

of man through animals and birds. The tribal myths deny the creation of world by a single force or God. Every being or object created has its own meaning and value and there is no difference between the creator and the created. Each gets transformed into the other and each part of existence is dependent on some other part of the world. The earth and sky are divine couples and their separation has given space for animals and humans to live on earth. The sun and the moon are siblings. Even the good spirits are not independent. They have to depend on the bad spirits for certain things. The tribal myths reflect their wisdom of living in harmony with nature and acceptance of both the good and bad as part of being.

Natural Elements and Animal Myths

Most of the myths and folktales of the Canadian coast have salmon, raven, the thunderbird, female images, snake images, whales, frogs and sea serpents as the common motifs. The natives of the Northwest Pacific coast have preserved their history and beliefs in myths and they can be visualized on their houses, totem poles, canoes clothing, boxes and ceremonial regalia (Macdonald viii). Oceans, sky, earth, water the sun and the moons are the prominent parts of stories as well as paintings and carvings. Encounters with supernatural elements are common and killing of animals is not an act of savagery or an instinctive process of satisfaction. It is more a ritual than a desire. Salmon, the main food of coastal people, is revered and certain rituals and formalities have to be followed in killing it and in the disposal of its remains. Hunters communicated with the spirits of animals asking for their release so that men could hunt them for food. Before the hunt, the hunters had to undergo purifying ritual baths. Ritual songs were sung over the dead animals and they were profusely thanked before the consumption of food. In the same way, the trees were also respected and while using them for various purposes like building, clothing and medicines prayers were offered to them and sculptors offered thanks to the trees by carving fine images of the trees (Ruddel 48). Even in the Indian puranas and stories from the Upanishad, it is mentioned that the rishis used only the naturally separated ripe fruits and offered prayers to the spirits of the trees before using the plant products. Water, the Sun, the Moon and the land are all accorded divine status and are considered sacred. The Tsimshian tribe believed salmon to be humans and thought that a certain number of humans were released as salmon to satisfy their hunger. All the fish bones and other remains were burned and thrown back into the river so that the souls could transform into human forms again. They had great respect for the fish and made fish clubs made of stone, wood and bone. They never killed them out of greed. Every element of nature that was of use to them was respected and was part of their existence. In the plains of Northeast, people believe that migratory birds visit their areas and wish to be killed as they want their spirits to be released. The hunters consider it a merciful act on their part to kill them and release their spirits (Partita 158,159). The Raven's magic canoe is a prominent Canadian myth in which the Raven is the force that put the sun and moon in the sky and released human beings from the giant clam cell. Raven is not the benevolent god but a synthesis of both evil and good forces. His canoe can shrink to the size of a pine needle and can hold the entire universe. The Raven image is found on

totem poles, paintings on the house front, clothing and ceremonial objects. All aboriginal cultures believed in the inter dependence of all things. They found an underlying current of connectivity between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual. This realization helped them to be humble and recognize the importance of every part of nature. They obtained the necessities of life from the resources around them but with a sense of respect.

Supernatural Elements

For all the native communities, the spirit of nature was a very vital aspect and they always tried to communicate with this spirit. The practice of shamanism was prevalent in every indigenous community. The shaman intervened with the spirit and seemed to have had tremendous influence. It was the practice of every group to consult the shaman before starting a hunting expedition, to heal the sick and at times of wars, famines and floods. For the women of Salish tribe of Canada, weaving goat hair blankets was both a creative and spiritual activity. The tribes of Canada recognized the creative power of women and many women functioned as spiritual healers. The hills of Shillong have a number of myths that mention about the spirits of forest that are benevolent and mischievous also. They tell about *suidtynjang*-the mischievous spirits that troubled travelers and made them wander in the forests (Parita 225). The Nuuchah-Nulth doorways symbolize the concept of transformation from one life to another. Even the doorways and the poles set up outside the houses represent the physical word and the spiritual domain presented inside. Ravens transform into human forms and salmons can take the human forms when they wished. The totem poles of Canada are seen as lines of communication between humans and spirits. It was believed that communication with the spirits could heal, empower and purify mankind (Ruddel 25). The totem poles extended symbolically between the upper, middle and the lower worlds.

The hills of Shillong in India have many stories of people taking the forms of tigers and snakes. The image of the trickster is common among the tribes of Northwest Canada as well as North east frontier groups. The Canadians consider the Raven as the trickster and he is a paradox, an element of good and bad. Among the natives of the plains of Assam, there is a character called Tentan who functions as the trickster. As Elwin explains, "He is known as Mache to the Angamis, as Iki to the Semas, as Apfuho to the Lhotas and as Che, Iki or Ichu to different groups of the Rangma Nagas" (138).

There are a number of tribal myths about reptiles, frogs, leeches and fish. The Assamese don't eat Yami fish as they believe that it was once a girl. The native Canadians don't consume the totem animals but during the totem festivals consume the flesh of totem animals and these festivals are considered sacred. These festivals are not held often and that, in fact, ensures the optimised use of species of animals with each clan having its own totem. There is a Wancho story that states that a man in his desire to drink all water for himself turned into a fish. There are many stories of girls marrying snakes and snakes taking human form in order to marry the women of

their liking. The Bori, Bugun, Hill Miri and Idu Mishmi tribes have stories on marriage between snakes and humans. Birds also have a prominent place in native myths. In a Moklum tale, the owl is the original possessor of fire. In another tale, men obtained fire through a crow. The Wanchos believe that the boon of death is a gift from the birds. The AngamiNagas believe that the Sun can come only after hearing the crowing of the cock. They are venerated as messengers that bring in helpful messages and as means of sacrifice to appease the angry elements (Elwin 340). The thunderbird, a supernatural creature is a prominent figure in most of the totem-pole carvings found in the tribal coasts of Canada.

Creation Myths

The Canadian creation myths are abundant with the theme of connectivity among humans, animals and spirits. The ideas of conflict and robbing of resources from the original resources often corroborate with the modern environmental and ecological theories which highlight the rights of animals and the greed of man in exploiting all resources paying scant respect to the natural ecological balance. The Haida myths mention how the Raven, the trickster, stole the sun from his grandfather and created the moon and the stars from it. He was the one who released humans from the clam shell and gave them fire. The Raven being a combination of the good and the bad took away the power of communication between the spirits and the humans. The Cree myths state that the earth was inhabited by only animals and spirits. It is stated that the order of creation was the thunderbirds, the insects, the lowly frogs, the wolves, the beavers and later on, the humans. The Mi'kmaq myth is about the greed of humans and how they were punished for taking more than they needed. Ultimately the wicked were punished by the tears of the sun which swept them off in the form of floods. Only an old couple survived the catastrophe as they were not greedy. The Algonquin myth also narrates how Gluskap, the good brother created the earth from his mother's body and how his greedy brother, Malsum remained a vindictive wolf (www.ucalgary 2, 3,4). Creation myths try to explain the process of creation and its origin. The myths of natives explore many interesting questions like the Sun's excess of heat, the Moon's coolness, the marks on the moon, the cause of eclipse, the creation of the earth, water bodies and the formation of days and nights and also different seasons. Though they are not backed up by scientific investigation and historical exploration, they have a similar function to science, theology, religion, anthropology and other related fields. They try to provide an explanation to natural phenomena and the cosmological mysteries seen around. As Doyle Bernard explains,

Creation myths often invoke primal gods and animals, titanic struggles between opposite forces or the death and/ or dismemberment of these gods or animals as the means whereby the universe and its components were created (Doyle 1).

The native myths do not deify the forces of nature but consider them the most essential parts of existence and the most powerful elements. Among the hill tribes of Assam in India, worship of the heavenly bodies is almost not present but they are

called upon to witness oaths. The Ao tribes of Assam indulge in the Sun worship as the weather god. In Assam, the Sun is believed to be feminine and the moon, the masculine. The Boris, the Singphos, the Padams, the Bhaguns and many other tribes consider them as siblings. The natives also believed that the sky and earth were joined together but later on distanced themselves to give space for animals to move freely. Even the Vedic Mythology makes the same kind of statement (Elwin 31, 32). Many of the northeastern native myths mention the land of women and the power of women as creators and protectors. It was also believed that women were conceived by the wind and the sting of bees. Some of the Singpho myths narrate how women fought for the company of men and after satisfying their desires killed them. The Canadian native myths have many representations of women as creative forces. Woman's images with big bowls symbolizing creative force and also the snake imagery representing the masculine role in creation are found in plenty carved on the totem poles and doorways of houses.

According to a Hrusso myth, the knowledge of water came to men and animals through a bird called Horsi-Basam. The myths tell about the presence of water in streams and rivers and a certain part, in the sky. Some of the water myths associated with women and at times of floods, led to irrational and violent ways of appeasement of the water spirits, such as placing fire on woman's head and poisoning fish in the nearby streams to make the frogs weep (Elwin 67, 68). There are many water myths found among the hills and plains of the Northeast as water separated the tribal from the mainland and it was water that provided them fish. The tribal, unlike the present greedy world, had the humility to acknowledge the natural bounty and expressed their gratitude in various ways. They performed various rituals, like dance and songs, prayers and ceremonies to acknowledge their own inadequacies and the greatness of the natural elements in providing them with their needs. As Ruddle observes:

Through rituals, people acknowledge human frailties in light of the greatness of the creator and seek reciprocity by asking that the sun continue to rise, the salmon and other fruits the earth return, and the seasons rotate through the cycle as they have done since time began (25).

Though these myths reflect lack of scientific knowledge, the sense of value of things available and their appreciation and the intention of sustaining them for future, thinking of the wellbeing of the next generations to come, are all marks of wisdom that the present generation is absolutely lacking in. Most of the evolving environmental and ecological movements are inspired by the tribal wisdom of preservation and living in harmony with the natural elements around. Many of the animal myths on salmon and animals mainly used for food mirror the idea of replacing the used resources and giving enough time for the sources to replenish. A sensible and judicious use of resources is advocated through these myths. Decoding of these myths by anthropologists, geologists and ecologists have provided vital clues for understanding the native wisdom.

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